

The Importance of the Pedagogy Process.

By Stephanie Watson

As I prepare a syllabus for the students enrolled in Freshman Composition, I include five types of essays, which I expect any high school graduate to have an idea of how to write. The first of these five essays is a simple remembering essay with the only guideline being that they write three to four pages describing a memory that is important to them. I encourage their writing in first person, making the essay a personal narrative, but also making this essay much easier for the students to write. Imagine my disappointment when after the first essay was completed and turned in I found the majority of the grades to be low Cs, high Ds because the students in my class have no idea how to organize, form, or proof an essay. High school English classes are obviously teaching something other than essay writing.

Walk into any high school English classroom in the state of Texas, and you will find students reading classic literature. Homer's *The Odyssey*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, or perhaps *King Lear*, Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, are among a few of the novels that high school English educators select for their students to read, study, and test over. On top of teaching students the classics, high school teachers have to focus upon preparing their students to pass the required standardized tests that our state government deems so important, so they concentrate on teaching young men and women how to simply pass a test. This means that they focus on teaching not how to write a good solid organized essay, but on how to write a personal narrative of two pages without focusing on having them use any type of writing process. Yet once the students leave their high school environment they find themselves ill prepared to enter a Freshman Composition classroom, which focuses solely on the writing process. This is due to a majority of high schools teaching not the pedagogy process, but

teaching them to write to a test. The writing *process* is important; teachers of eleventh and twelfth graders should be focusing more on writing, incorporating it with reading great literature. This process is easily taught to high school students and can be integrated into a classroom, not only continuing the literature reading, but also adding the writing process into the curriculum.

The pedagogy or writing process can be defined any number of ways, by any number of theorists. A common set of teaching methods used for college student instruction includes a three-step process of prewriting, drafting, and post-writing. The prewriting phase is used to show students brainstorming techniques, which can assist in their discovery process when trying to determine topics to write about. Students may find “a question or problem may not be well-defined, but sense something unknown or disagree with other’s views” (Ramage 485) thus wish to investigate and find the answers. As instructors we want to “include activities that motivate students to write, generate ideas for writing, and focus the attention of students on objective of the writing” (Norton 287). Techniques such as drawing, listing and categorizing, and semantic mapping can be introduced as methods to stimulate, prompt, and inspire writing. “Where prewriting experiences allow students to explore, imagine, consider initial structure, and think about [the] details that go into their writing,” (294) moving from the prewriting step to the actual writing process, also known as drafting, will demand some additional considerations that as teachers we must introduce to our students before the pen touches the paper.

The drafting phase of the pedagogy process may include creating outlines, focusing on a specific point to be made, considering the audience who will be reading the final paper, and the linguistic choices to be made. “The objective of [the actual drafting] phase is the fairly rapid writing of ideas generated, developed, and redefined during the prewriting phase” (301). This phase “often leads writers to discover new ideas, to complicate or refocus the problem, and to

sometimes change directions” (Ramage 490). While all of these changes may occur during the drafting phase, students may have the tendency to become unorganized in their writing, and many experts believe an outline will keep writers on task. Author Ayn Rand believes that “most writing problems – the psychological barriers, setbacks, discouragements – come from the absence of a proper outline . . . thus [the writing] falls apart structurally” (Norton 295).

Encouraging students to write with some type of organization is beneficial and will be seen in the finished product.

The final stage in the pedagogy process over the years, revision, “has been a neglected part of the writing process” (Dean 9). Experts believe the reason for the neglect might be that revision is hard to teach. “Revision isn’t easily reduced to a model as with prewriting clusters, Venn diagrams, or freewriting” (Campo 257). Revision tends to happen after the first drafting process, is also where major portions of writing are still completed, and most certainly is a recursive step, for drafting and revision tend to go hand in hand. Most experienced writers will write, revise, write, and revise slowly “going through the first draft, adding, deleting, reordering, or completely rewriting passages” (Ramage 498). Each student should be taught proper revision processes, such as, peer review and editing workshops. Students must be shown how to revise properly, with instructors informing the students what, when, and how they should be searching for possible mistakes and probable places for revision.

Many theorists disagree with a three-step process in teaching writing. Patricia Bizzell believes that “there is no one composing process that works for all writers and all situations” (109). She believes that each person who writes “employs several processes for different types of writing and that writing is a repetitive process that cannot be divided into isolated stages of pre-writing, drafting, and revising” (109). Bizzell actually defines composition herself as “all the

processes out of which a piece of written work emerges” (122). She has employed several methods to the process of writing from a product-centered pedagogy, to cognitive composing developments. She states that many researchers interpret results based on their own personal pedagogical assumptions, whether it is on classroom size or teaching methods (125).

Experts Gordon Rohman and Raymond Wlecke suggest that journal keeping and mediation should be taught as a part of the first of the three stage composing process of pre-writing, writing, and editing (Connors 6). This pedagogy seems limited to being linear because it tends to “move through the composing process without backtracking or omitting any stage” (Bizzell 113). However, the Rohman-Wlecke teaching model has several key stages missing, for example, what if a student has no organizational skills and needs an outline to maintain a sense of order. Does outlining fall under the “writing” stage of the Rohman-Wlecke process? “... [R]ather than grammar drills, [prewriting activities] could become the actual content of the writing course” (Connors 5) when using this three-stage method. While prewriting is a great way to initiate students to the writing process, it fails to teach many of the rules that should be learned when it comes to formal essay writing. Whereas journal writing is a great exercise for brainstorming ideas to use in essays, it does nothing to help the student prepare a cohesive, mechanically correct final essay. Journal writing is an informal act that allows a student to write without the pressure of making sure every “I” is dotted and “T” is crossed. This fun activity allows students to write down what is going on in their head.

Linda Flower and John R. Hayes use the writing process as a way to see what is going on inside a writer’s head, and ask their writers to talk aloud while in the thought process. Their model divides the composing process into three main parts, a task environment, a writing process, and a writer’s long-term memory. These are then subdivided into even more sections.

This composing process is recursive and not linear, so the writer can switch back and forth from one writing subprocess to another at any time while composing (Bizzell 116). The process tends to have a lack of organization and is not a beneficial way to teach students the beginnings of how to write. Organization is important to helping a new writer see the writing process we teach. Nancy Sommers makes the argument that the “whole composing process is a process of revision in which the writer does not simply polish her style, but more important, develops her ideas” (117). This leaves the teacher to understanding that even the more abysmal of first drafts has hope due to the continual revising process. The recursive organizing and revising process is functionally sound, students understand this method fairly well, and above all, they respond favorably to any critiquing of their work.

Student response techniques that appraise student writing obviously help define criteria for evaluating students’ writing. Richard W. Beach describes in his essay “Evaluating Students’ Response Strategies in Writing about Literature” that the various response strategies are important to “recognize that the quality of students’ responses [do] depend on the quality of the assignments and social context in which the students are responding” (Cooper 195). These techniques include: engaging, recalling, inferring, understanding the text as a cultural world, connecting, and interpreting or judging. Beach states that these strategies “serve as a framework or taxonomy for organizing instruction and evaluation” that they are “designed to encourage students to go beyond simply retelling and interpreting texts” (196). Instructors can have students write journal entries on their own interpretations of a text and comment in a “conversational mode, posing questions and giving reactions in an attempt to provoke further thinking about the responses to the novel” (198). This method of instruction sounds similar to the reader response theory, which was a “reaction against the New Criticism, or formalistic

approach, which dominated literary criticism for roughly a half-century” (Guerin 355). Beach explains that this method, which expresses an “engagement or aesthetic response,” (Cooper 195) is an excellent way to integrate writing and reading together. Whether it is called reading response theory or student response strategies, these methods and approaches of interpretation and response should still be considered valuable teaching tools, especially in the high school environment. They should be used today in our classrooms because it makes students comfortable interpreting and writing about literature.

Teaching the method of reader response criticism in writing is frowned upon by most academia. Many say that reader response theory is subjective and relative, and most teachers are more comfortable giving students a solid basis or meaning behind a text rather than allowing the students to interpret for themselves their own meanings by using their own experiences. This “truncated, familiar descriptions of their engagement” (195) is also considered self-indulgent, yet students tend to bring in their own experiences of life into the classroom, so why should we fear their using these experiences in their writing? Each strategic criterion that Beach describes does in fact help students to learn not only about the text through their own familiarity, but also teaches them to be comfortable when writing. In preparation for college composition, high school educators might consider teaching the reader response essay, teaching students the writing process, thus preparing students for the writing expected of them as they enter the college environment.

To begin to understand exactly how the pedagogy process could be implemented using the reader response theory, I sought out a high school instructor that would be willing to allow me to experiment with her class. I was welcomed into Mrs. Chumley’s twelfth grade class at

Asumud High School* and explained what I would attempt, which was to change the process in which they had been previously taught to write. I explained that I would look through their prior essays, which had been graded, and I would give a second grade based on my own Freshman Composition class grading standards. These prior essays were what I would call persuasive arguments. Out of the twenty-five students, after I had given each essay a second grade, this class has a total of three B's, ten C's, eight D's, and four F's. The largest problem I found with these essays was their lack of organization, no thesis sentence, no conclusion, no transitions, and failure to maintain cohesiveness to both the topic sentence of their respective paragraphs and the thesis.

Then I gave Mrs. Chumley instructions to a pedagogy process, which included prewriting, drafting, and post writing steps. These steps were to be implemented on their next essay, which I suggested be a three page reading response essay. They were to summarize any of the literature they had read up to the present and then write a personal response.

The prewriting steps I suggested were to have the student's journal write on their response to the literature they choose. They could write in any manner, and they were not to worry about grammar or punctuation. One such journal entry was as follows:

I really liked reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I get how Scout feels about her brother and Dill since my brothers and their friends do not like me to hang out with them at all. Scout really wanted to play with Dill and Jem but I think it was stupid of them not to let her. She was really mad when they went swimming and left her out. My dumb brothers are always leaving me out and when I want to ride the four wheelers with them they just ignore me or tell me to go away because I am a girl. Jem always tells Scout she acts more and more like a girl all the time.

This student felt that she could relate to a character in Harper Lee's novel and wrote her own

* Name of school has been altered.

feelings that were parallel. This prewriting step helped Mrs. Chumley and myself see what kind of idea the student might have for a paper.

The next step I requested the students complete was an outline. While I understand the dislike for the five-paragraph format, these students had no idea how to organize any of their ideas in preparation to write a first draft. Mrs. Chumley and I introduced a format, which does not necessarily demand five paragraphs, but it does explain an organizational method that the students could understand and use for their own work. Using the same student's idea on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, her outline looked like this:

- I. Introduction
 - Summarize Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*
 - Thesis: Harper Lee wrote Scout very realistic; I can understand how Scout felt when Jem ignored her and called her a girl because my own brothers tell me all the time that I am a girl and cannot do the same stuff that they can do.
- II. Response – How do I feel about my brother's treating me this way and how does this compare to how Jem treated Scout?
- III. Conclusion

While this was a rough outline for the student to work with, it gave her a sense of organization before she began the drafting process.

To teach the actual drafting process, I had Mrs. Chumley begin by explaining that a summary should accurately and objectively represent the key ideas. "Summaries cite the author and title, accurately represent the main ideas, quote directly key phrases or sentences, and describe main features of the text" (Reid 153). When summarizing, the student must understand they are to be objective and need to accurately represent the main ideas. The summary should appear first and be about one-third of the entire paper. The thesis sentence of the essay should be the transition from the summary into the response. The response needs to "focus on [the student's] ideas and reactions" (Reid 153). A student can analyze the text, the organization of the text or story, agree or disagree with the author, or interpret the author's ideas. Supporting the

response with evidence is also important. Students cannot make a claim such as, “I really didn’t like *To Kill a Mockingbird* because it was dumb.” They have to understand that any base claim made must be supported with textual evidence. The best way to have student’s practice evidentiary writing is to have them use examples from their own experiences.

First drafts in Mrs. Chumley’s class were to be 200 words, basically a summary and a clear thesis sentence. The students brought these rough drafts into the classroom, and we began the first step in the revision process. While many experts and instructors believe that peer review is worthless, I feel it is beneficial to students if they are taught what to look for in their peer’s papers. Mrs. Chumley and I discussed several ideas on what the students should look for in each other’s papers and for this first draft we instructed the students to pair up, trade papers, and look for these specific points:

1. Is there a thesis sentence? Underline it.
2. Does the author of the paper introduce the text and the author?
3. What do you think the author of the paper believes is the main idea of the text they are summarizing?
4. Are direct quotes used? Should they be? Would direct quotes and/or author tags make the summary more effective?
5. Look at the grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure. Underline any mistakes.

Mrs. Chumley and I were surprisingly pleased with the results of this first peer review; the students actively participated and had no problem critiquing each other’s papers. They turned these in, and I reviewed their progress and comments, finding that they had no problem looking for the items we had suggested they look for.

The second draft consisted of 500 words and began their response portion of the essay. Mrs. Chumley and I decided we would experiment with this peer review, and we gave the students no direction on what to look for. We also placed the students in groups of four instead of in pairs. This turned out to be a mistake; the students traded papers, but made useless

comments like, “I really liked what you said here” and “I think this is a great paper.” The students also had a harder time focusing on their work and gossiped more about things not related to their papers. As Mrs. Chumley and I collected these drafts, we both decided that the group peer review was not a success for this particular class.

The next draft was 800 words. We had the students pair up instead of join groups. We also gave them a specific list of items to look for in each other’s papers. Once more I was pleased with the results. The students made strong and helpful comments because we guided them through the peer review process. They also seemed to like the guidance in looking for errors and problems. One young man commented that by looking at his partner’s paper for specific problems, he was able to fix his own paper’s errors and problems. As I gathered this last draft, I was excited to see that these papers had more corrections and comments on them. I realize that this method of peer review may not work for every class, but it is the teacher’s job to try different methods of peer review and see what works best with each particular class.

After Mrs. Chumley returned the final draft with her and my comments added, the students were given one week to complete and turn in their final copy. As I began reading these final copies, I immediately began to see an improvement in their writing. All but three of the papers were well organized, followed the thesis well and did not introduce anything new to the paper. I still found problems with transitions, but for the most part, the students’ paragraphs tended to follow their topic sentences. Both Mrs. Chumley and I agreed that the writing had progressed, and their grades showed as much. This time there were 4 A’s, 8 B’s 9 C’s, 2 D’s, and 2 F’s. I believe Mrs. Chumley’s twelfth grade class showed improvement in their grades and in their writing because they were taught a writing process.

Teaching high school students any method of a pedagogy process will only enhance their writing and prove a benefit once they begin their college careers. It does not matter what exact process students are taught, there are many variations and different opinions of how, what, and why a pedagogy process can or should be taught, but students have to be educated in some type of writing process in order for their writing to be organized, focused, and, well thought out. Certainly high school students should continue to be taught methods that will assist in their passing the standardized achievement exams which our government deems so important; however, once they leave behind their high school years and enter the college environment, they have to be prepared to understand the processes which college Freshman Composition will require.

Works Cited

- Beach, Richard. "Evaluating Students' Response Strategies in Writing about Literature." *Evaluating Writing*. Ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1998.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "Composing Processes: An Overview." *The Allyn and Bacon Sourcebook for College Writing Teachers*. 2nd ed. Ed. James C. McDonald. Boston: Pearson Education, 2000.
- Campo, Vicky. "Invention Activity Late in the Writing Process." *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2002.
- Connors, Robert J. "Introduction to D. Gordon Rohman's 'Pre-Writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process.'" *Teaching Writing: Landmarks and Horizons*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002.

Dean, Deborah. "Revisiting the Writing Process: Rethinking Revision." *The English Record*. 53.2: 8 –16.

Guerin, Wilfred L. et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.

Miller, Susan. "Why Composition Studies Disappeared and What Happened Then." *Composition Studies in the New Millennium*. 2003: 48 –56.

Norton, Donna E. "Composition: The Writing Process." *The Effective Teaching of Language Arts*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004.

Ramage, John D. et al. "Writing as a Problem-Solving Process." *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing*. 3rd ed. New York: Longman, 2003.

Reid, Stephen. "Techniques for Writing about Reading." *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.